From Flower Children to the "United States of Israel": How a Sleeping Generation Failed to Stop Empire

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This paper begins as a private message: how do you tell an old friend that the flower children, hippies, and Vietnam vets accomplished almost nothing against empire? They marched, sang, got high, and bled, then mostly settled down into careers, mortgages, and cable news. Whatever was dangerous in their defiance seems to have been absorbed, branded, and sold back to them. Meanwhile, the machinery they briefly rattled has not only endured but refined itself. The deep entanglement of the United States and Israel now allows a joint war-making system to devastate entire populations with near impunity. When someone calls it the "United States of Israel," they are naming a fused project: shared weapons, shared narratives, shared enemies, and shared moral evasions. The promise of "Never again" has become selective, and a generation that once shouted "Hell no, we won't go" mostly watches from their living rooms as others are crushed. This is not a neutral history of the 1960s or of the Middle East. It is a moral audit of a cohort that had a chance to alter the trajectory of empire and did not. It asks what they truly accomplished, how they went to sleep, and what responsibilities still remain as new wars unfold.

Keywords: 1960s counterculture, flower children, hippies, Vietnam veterans, antiwar movement, soldiers' revolt, United States of Israel, US–Israel alliance, Gaza war, empire, militarism, military-industrial complex, generational failure, co-optation, moral sleep, Holiness Movement, Christian conscience, prophetic witness, political protest, structural power, US foreign policy, Middle East wars, solidarity, repentance, late-life responsibility.

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1. Setting the Question: Did the 1960s Actually Change Anything?

The starting point is not an academic conference but a private, uneasy sentence in a direct message: how do you tell an old friend that his generation, the one that marched and sang and bled, went to sleep? Behind that question is a deeper wound. For many who watched the 1960s unfold as children, or came of age just after, the era has functioned as a kind of secular Pentecost: a moment when the spirit moved, when institutions trembled, when the young said no to war and hypocrisy. The story is that something fundamentally changed.

But when you look at the continuity of American empire after Vietnam, and at the fusion of U.S. power with Israeli military projects in the present, another story forces itself into view. Maybe very little changed where it mattered most. Maybe the structure absorbed the shock, rebranded the rebellion, and carried on. This section sets the problem in plain terms. It is not an attempt to score points against elders, but a moral inventory of what a generation actually did to interrupt the machinery that now operates so freely in the Middle East and beyond.

1.1 The DM to a friend: naming a sleeping generation

The DM is short and brutal: the flower children, hippies, and Vietnam vets "accomplished nothing" and "went to sleep," while what you call the "United States of Israel" prepares to kill on a scale that makes the old protests look like a brief dream. It is the kind of sentence that can destroy a friendship if it is heard as contempt instead of grief.

To call a generation "sleeping" is not to say that no one in it was brave. Many marched; some went to prison; some never came back from Southeast Asia. But the accusation here is aimed at the long arc, not the exceptional moments. Sleep means the retreat from costly engagement into private life. It means an entire cohort accepting comfort in exchange for silence, taking the settlement package that empire offers: a house, a pension, a television tuned to managed narratives about what the country is doing abroad.

The DM is therefore less an insult than a diagnosis. It asks whether a lifetime of looking away cancels out a few years of youthful courage. It asks what it means to live long enough to see your own generation's slogans replayed as background music for commercials while the same kinds of planes, with better electronics, bomb different brown people in a different decade. It is painful to say such things to someone who still carries scars from that earlier conflict. But the pain is already there in the fact; the message simply refuses to cover it with nostalgia.

1.2 Flowers, rifles, napalm: remembered images and present realities

For many, the 1960s have been preserved as a sequence of powerful images. A young woman placing a flower in the barrel of a soldier's rifle. Lines of troops advancing in formation through tear gas while students chant. Draft cards burning in metal trash cans. A naked child running

down a road, burned by napalm, while the camera records what cannot be forgotten. These pictures form a kind of secular iconography. They promise that resistance was real, that conscience spoke, that history turned.

But memory is selective. The camera frame never widens to show the Pentagon budgets that barely dipped, the corporations that learned how to sponsor the counterculture, or the millions of citizens who watched the same images on television and then voted for "law and order." Today, a new set of images circulates: apartment towers collapsing under bombs, fathers holding children pulled from rubble, drone footage that resembles a video game until you remember the people under the crosshairs. The continuity is unnerving. The costumes and the geography have changed, but the basic pattern has not.

When you put the old photographs next to the new ones, a disquieting question appears. If flowers in rifle barrels, nationwide marches, sit-ins, songs, and even mutinies inside the armed forces could not prevent this later moment, how much did the 1960s really alter the trajectory of imperial power? Were they a hinge of history, or a vivid episode that left the underlying machinery of war intact?

1.3 The claim of non-accomplishment: harsh judgment or sober audit?

To say that the 1960s "accomplished nothing" sounds, at first hearing, like an injustice. There were genuine gains: civil rights legislation was strengthened; the draft was eventually abolished; certain forms of open racism and sexism were pushed out of respectable public life. Many people experienced real liberation in their personal lives. Some of these changes were hard-won and costly.

Yet the claim of non-accomplishment is not about those surface reforms. It is about the deeper question of whether empire itself was meaningfully constrained. From that angle, the record is bleak. The military budget did not shrink into irrelevance; it grew. Intelligence agencies were not dismantled; they adapted. The arms industry did not lose influence; it deepened its ties to finance, technology, and politics. Energy companies and global corporations learned how to operate within the new cultural climate, sponsoring the music and styles that once symbolized defiance.

Saying "they accomplished nothing" is a way of refusing comforting half-truths. It is not literally accurate if one is counting laws and fashions, but it may be accurate at the level that matters most for life and death: the ability of the United States to project power abroad with minimal internal resistance. The phrase is thus best read as a provocation: a demand that those who lived through the era distinguish between local, personal, or symbolic victories and the question of whether the imperial project was actually derailed. A sober audit will grant the former while admitting how little happened on the latter front.

1.4 Why the US–Israel war machine forces the question back onto the 1960s

The phrase “United States of Israel” is deliberately jarring. It does not mean that the two countries have literally merged, but that their military and political projects have become tightly coupled. Weapons, intelligence, vetoes at international bodies, and shared narratives about terrorism and security bind them together. When Israeli jets drop American-made munitions on densely populated areas, or when American officials shield those operations diplomatically, the fusion comes into sharp focus.

This is precisely the kind of situation in which one might expect the generation of former protesters and veterans to rise again. They know what it means to be lied to about war. They remember official assurances that were later exposed as propaganda. They have seen what bombardment does to human bodies. If the 1960s had truly built a durable culture of anti-imperial conscience, one would expect a visible, organized, elder-led resistance to this new configuration of power.

The relative absence of such a response is what throws the earlier era into question. The US–Israel war machine functions as a test case for 1960s mythology. It reveals how thoroughly empire survived and how weak the institutional legacy of that decade’s dissent has turned out to be. If the people who once chanted against Vietnam now largely accept or ignore the devastation of another people, then the story of their youthful defiance has to be retold in a darker key.

This is why the question, “Did the 1960s actually change anything?” cannot be left as a rhetorical flourish. The bombs falling today, the blockades enforced today, and the alliances defended today are all part of the same long arc. To face that honestly is not to despise a generation, but to ask it, gently or sharply, to wake up before whatever time is left is gone.

2. The Counterculture and the Antiwar Wave: Hopes, Myths, and Real Gains

The people who now sit in retirement homes or suburban living rooms, watching new wars on larger screens, were once at the center of something that looked unprecedented. Long hair and bare feet, rock festivals and draft resistance, communes and consciousness-raising circles: the counterculture seemed to represent a generational refusal to live as their parents had lived. It fused personal rebellion with political opposition to the war in Vietnam.

From a distance, it is easy to remember the era as one coherent uprising against the system. In reality, it was a patchwork of overlapping currents: spiritual seekers and serious Marxists, hedonists and disciplined organizers, students and working-class veterans, Black radicals and white dropouts. The antiwar tide rose within this swirl but was never identical to it.

To understand what the 1960s did and did not achieve, we have to separate myth from structure. There were real waves of mobilization and real shifts in cultural norms. There were also deep limitations: fragmentations, blind spots, and a tendency to confuse symbolic gestures with power. This section sketches who the "flower children" and hippies actually were, how the antiwar movement grew, what it truly won in the cultural sphere, and whether protest itself can claim to have ended the Vietnam War.

2.1 Who the "flower children" and hippies actually were

The phrase "flower children" conjures an image: young people in loose clothing, beads, and sandals, handing out flowers, singing gentle songs about love and peace. It is a powerful picture, but it describes only a slice of those involved. Many of the so-called hippies were white, middle-class youth who had the surplus security to experiment with dropping out. Others were working-class kids who drifted into the scene through music and drugs, not through theory or politics.

There were also sharp differences between the visible centers and the wider periphery. The famous districts and festivals—Haight-Ashbury, the Village, Woodstock—were magnets for cameras. But most people who took part in the broader counterculture lived in ordinary towns and campuses, testing new ways of dressing, dating, thinking, and worshiping without ever becoming icons. Their rebellion might have been as simple as listening to certain bands, smoking marijuana in the woods, or refusing their parents' church.

Politically, the spectrum ran from apolitical dropouts to highly committed militants. Some saw themselves as building a new society in the shell of the old, with communes, free schools, and alternative media. Others saw the lifestyle as an end in itself. Most did not read dense theory or plan long-term strategies for power. They reacted, improvised, and followed currents of feeling and fashion.

To call them "hippies" as if they were one thing is therefore misleading. What they did share, in broad terms, was a distrust of authority, a belief in personal authenticity, and some degree of openness to altered consciousness—whether through art, religion, or chemicals. These instincts were crucial in weakening blind obedience to the state, but they did not automatically translate into sustained, organized resistance to the structures of empire.

2.2 The anti-Vietnam movement: from campus protest to mass mobilization

The antiwar movement did not begin with hippies; it began with a small number of activists, students, clergy, and intellectuals who questioned the premises of the war early, when it was still framed as a limited intervention. At first, protests were modest and often ridiculed. As casualties mounted and the draft reached deeper into the population, resistance spread.

Universities became central nodes. Teach-ins, sit-ins, and marches turned campuses into contested spaces. Professors debated the legitimacy of the war; students refused to attend classes and instead studied foreign policy and colonial history. Outside the universities, faith communities, civil rights organizations, and some unions began to link the war overseas with injustices at home.

Over time, the antiwar movement moved from the margins into mainstream politics. Major marches drew hundreds of thousands to Washington. Politicians began to position themselves as "peace candidates." Media coverage shifted, sometimes highlighting atrocities and strategic failures, sometimes painting protesters as naïve or dangerous. Within the armed forces, signs of strain appeared: desertions, refusals, underground newspapers, and open refusals to patrol in certain units.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposition to the war had become widespread in the general public. Parents who might have dismissed the early protesters found themselves questioning the sense of sending their own sons. The movement was never fully unified, and its tactics ranged from nonviolent civil disobedience to fringe groups embracing bombings. But in raw numbers and visibility, it was a mass mobilization that forced itself into national consciousness.

The crucial question, though, is what kind of power this mobilization represented. It could disrupt, dramatize, and influence elections. It could unsettle elites enough that they sought exit strategies. It could not, by itself, seize control of the machinery of foreign policy or dismantle the institutions that generated wars.

2.3 Cultural victories: music, sex, drugs, and the politics of feeling

If the antiwar movement's political impact is contested, its cultural impact is obvious. The 1960s reshaped music, fashion, and norms around sex and drugs in ways that persisted long after the marches ended. Rock concerts became sites of communal identity and, at times, of politicized feeling. Songs against the war or against "the system" played constantly on radios and stereos, embedding a skeptical attitude toward authority in popular culture.

Sexual norms loosened. The idea that young people should wait until marriage, or follow strictly scripted gender roles, lost its monopoly. Birth control, cohabitation, and a more open discussion of desire gave individuals new forms of autonomy, though not without new vulnerabilities. Psychedelics and marijuana were experimented with as tools for enlarging consciousness or simply for fun. For many, the altered states they induced felt like proof that the official story about reality was incomplete or false.

These shifts were not minor. They changed how people formed families, how they thought about pleasure and duty, and how they related to institutions such as church, school, and the

military. A deeply felt suspicion of hypocrisy and of rigid, top-down authority seeped into the culture.

Yet these cultural victories had an ambiguous relationship to anti-imperial politics. On the one hand, a population less deferential to authority is harder to mobilize for war. On the other hand, markets are extremely skilled at absorbing and selling rebellion back to the rebels. The music industry turned protest songs into profitable products. Fashion companies monetized the styles of the street. Even drug culture became a marketing niche.

The politics of feeling—preferring authenticity, "good vibes," and self-expression—could easily be separated from the politics of dismantling structures. One could oppose "bad vibes" and still pay taxes that funded bombing campaigns. One could smoke marijuana, listen to radical lyrics, and never attend a city council meeting, let alone build alternative institutions. Cultural liberation, in other words, did not automatically produce structural transformation.

2.4 Policy outcomes: did protest end the war, or did the system time out?

The Vietnam War did end, and protest played a role. It made the war politically costly. It undermined the image of unity that governments like to project in wartime. It contributed to shifts in public opinion and to electoral outcomes that brought in leaders more open to de-escalation. Military planners and political elites could not ignore the domestic backlash forever.

At the same time, the war's end can also be read as a convergence of other forces: military stalemate, the resilience and sacrifice of the Vietnamese, fractures within the US ruling class, economic pressures, and the need to redirect resources and attention to other priorities. Empires can abandon specific campaigns not because their structure has been defeated, but because a particular venture no longer serves their larger interests.

When the last helicopters lifted off, the United States did not disarm. It did not renounce intervention as a principle. It retooled: shifting to an all-volunteer force, refining media management, developing new doctrines for future conflicts, and learning how to fight long, low-visibility wars that generate less visible domestic opposition. The intelligence apparatus and military industries remained intact and, in many respects, strengthened.

So did protest "end the war," or did the system simply time out on a costly, politically inconvenient project? The most honest answer is that the antiwar movement hastened an exit from a particular war without forcing any fundamental redefinition of the country's imperial posture. The machinery that produced Vietnam remained in place, ready for the next conflict.

For those who were young then, it is tempting to remember the end of the war as a vindication: proof that marching and refusing and singing worked. This paper argues that such a memory is dangerously incomplete. It may comfort a generation that now faces its own mortality, but it

does little for the people living under later phases of the same empire's power. If the deeper structure survived intact, then the antiwar wave was, at best, a partial victory and, at worst, a rehearsal that never moved on to the main act of transforming the system itself.

3. Vietnam Veterans as Moral Witnesses and Limited Revolt

If the flower children symbolized one face of 1960s dissent, the Vietnam veterans represented another: men who had been inside the machine, done what was asked, and then said no. Their bodies carried shrapnel and tropical diseases; their minds carried memories that did not fit well with patriotic slogans. When they turned against the war, they brought a different kind of authority. They could not be waved away as pampered students or naïve idealists.

For a time, it looked as if this veterans' revolt might permanently alter how the United States made war. The image of former soldiers throwing their medals away, testifying about atrocities, or organizing against future interventions has remained powerful. Yet the long outcome is more sobering. The moral capital of Vietnam veterans has been partially absorbed into a culture of "support the troops," their critiques often blunted or compartmentalized. They stand as crucial witnesses, but their revolt did not become a lasting institutional check on empire.

3.1 From obedient draftees to disillusioned vets

Most of the men who ended up in Vietnam did not go there as radicals. Many were drafted, pulled from small towns and working-class neighborhoods with little sense of the geopolitical theories that allegedly justified their deployment. Others enlisted for reasons that had more to do with family tradition, economic opportunity, or the hope of a clear path in life than with any enthusiasm for the war itself. They were told they were defending freedom, stopping communism, fulfilling their duty.

Boot camp trained them in obedience and stripped away individuality. The emphasis was on following orders, not on questioning policy. For many, the first months in Vietnam were a blur of heat, fear, boredom, and sudden violence. The enemy seemed both everywhere and nowhere. The terrain was unfamiliar; the line between combatant and civilian was often impossible to discern. Friend and foe died in ways that felt random and senseless.

Disillusionment did not come all at once. It accumulated: a commander more concerned with body counts than human lives, an operation that destroyed villages with no clear purpose, rules of engagement that shifted with politics back home. Letters from family members mentioning protests, assassinations, and domestic unrest created a sense that the country they thought they were defending was not the one they had left. Some began to ask whether they were on the wrong side of history.

When they returned home, many discovered that the society they had supposedly protected was uneasy with their presence. Some faced hostility from antiwar activists who could not separate policy makers from the men sent to carry out those policies. Others encountered indifference, as neighbors changed the subject or offered platitudes instead of real listening. Obedient draftees gradually became disillusioned veterans, not only with the war but with a system that had used them and then struggled to integrate them back into its story of itself.

3.2 Soldiers' protests, GI resistance, and the cracks in discipline

Out of this disillusionment came forms of resistance that were unprecedented in scale for a modern American war. Within bases in Vietnam and in stateside installations, underground newspapers circulated, questioning the war and the officers who directed it. Coffeehouses near bases became informal organizing hubs where soldiers discussed politics, shared experiences, and sometimes received support from civilian activists.

Some resistance took the form of formal protest. Soldiers signed petitions, refused to deploy on certain missions, or sought conscientious objector status after already having seen combat. Others found less visible ways to limit their participation: "slow-walking" orders, feigning illness, deliberately misinterpreting commands, or avoiding patrols whenever possible. In extreme cases, violence turned inward, with incidents of "fragging" directed at officers who were perceived as reckless with the lives of their men.

These acts signaled real cracks in the discipline that war planners count on. When the rank and file no longer trust their officers or the mission, the effectiveness of a fighting force is compromised. Military leaders were forced to acknowledge morale problems and sometimes adjusted strategy or rotation policies to keep units functional. The spectacle of resistance from within the armed forces also strengthened the wider antiwar movement, offering proof that doubts about the war were not confined to campuses.

Yet GI resistance was uneven and often isolated. Many units remained obedient; many soldiers opposed the war privately but did not act. The institution of the military proved capable of riding out the storm, disciplining some resisters, tolerating others, and adjusting its practices enough to maintain basic command and control until the war wound down. The cracks were real, but they did not cause the structure to collapse.

3.3 Testimony, trauma, and the contested memory of the war

After the war, some veterans felt compelled to speak publicly about what they had seen and done. Hearings, press conferences, and memoirs brought stories of atrocities, moral injury, and the moral ambiguity of everyday operations to audiences that had mostly encountered the war as distorted images on television. These testimonies punctured comforting narratives about clean, surgical warfare and clarified the human cost on all sides.

At the same time, the psychological and spiritual wounds carried by veterans complicated how their testimony was received. Some were clearly traumatized, struggling with nightmares, guilt, addiction, or broken relationships. Their pain gave their words weight, but it also made them vulnerable to being dismissed as damaged or unstable. Others chose silence, preferring not to relive their experiences or fearing backlash from communities that still clung to patriotic interpretations of the war.

The memory of Vietnam became contested terrain. One strand emphasized betrayal: the idea that politicians and protesters had undermined the troops, preventing victory. Another stressed the moral failure of the war itself and the courage of those who resisted. Popular culture oscillated between these poles, producing films and novels that sometimes framed veterans as victims, sometimes as monsters, sometimes as reluctant prophets.

In this struggle over memory, veterans were both central and peripheral. They were called upon to legitimize narratives crafted by others, yet their own complex, contradictory experiences did not always fit neatly into the available scripts. As time passed, commemorations increasingly focused on "honoring service" in ways that could sidestep the question of whether the mission itself had been just. The radical potential of veterans' testimony—to permanently inoculate the public against future wars of choice—was diluted by this drift toward depoliticized respect.

3.4 Why the veterans' revolt never became a permanent brake on empire

Given the scale of disillusionment and resistance among Vietnam-era soldiers and veterans, it is reasonable to ask why their revolt did not leave a more lasting mark on American war-making. Part of the answer lies in the adaptive capacity of the state. Policy makers learned that a conscript army drawn from across society made large-scale war difficult to sustain politically. The shift to an all-volunteer force reduced the direct exposure of middle-class families to military service, narrowing the pool of those with personal reasons to resist.

Another part lies in how veterans themselves were fragmented. They were dispersed across the country, across class and race lines, into communities with very different attitudes toward the war. Some found political homes in antiwar organizations; others sought stability in conventional careers or turned away from politics altogether. The cost of continuing to fight, psychologically and socially, was high. Many chose to prioritize healing, family, and survival over permanent activism.

Culture also played its role. Narratives emphasizing the need to "support the troops regardless of the war" gradually redefined patriotism in ways that made it harder to mount criticisms of specific missions without being accused of betraying those who served. Veterans who spoke out risked being cast as unrepresentative or as tools of political factions. Meanwhile, new generations of soldiers were socialized under different conditions, with different incentives and

with less direct connection to the mass conscription experience that had made Vietnam such a broad social trauma.

Finally, empire operates through institutions that do not easily yield to sporadic moral shocks. The Pentagon, intelligence agencies, defense contractors, and their allies in finance and politics constitute a dense network of interests. To become a permanent brake on this system would have required veterans to form durable organizations with leverage in elections, media, and economic life. That did not happen at scale. The veterans' revolt was real, courageous, and morally significant, but it remained largely episodic and reactive.

In the end, Vietnam veterans stand as powerful witnesses whose stories can still awaken conscience. But as a collective force, they did not manage to transform the structures that sent them to war. Their revolt marked an interruption, not a reconfiguration. The system absorbed the shock, adjusted, and continued.

4. How a Generation Went to Sleep

By the late 1970s, the faces in the old protest photos had changed. The same people who once slept on commune floors and rode buses to marches now sat in staff meetings, mortgage offices, and church pews. Some never stopped resisting, but many did. A generation that briefly seemed ready to restructure society instead settled into it. The shift was not a sudden betrayal; it was a long slide. Careers, children, debts, and the slow erosion of energy all played their part. So did a culture that proved astonishingly capable of turning rebellion into a product.

The story of a sleeping generation is therefore not about individual hypocrisy so much as about the combined effect of a million small accommodations. When enough people who once chanted in the streets come to accept business as usual, the system does not need to defeat them. It only needs to wait them out and offer them a place to land.

4.1 From radicals to homeowners: the slide into comfort and career

For a twenty-year-old in 1968, the future felt wide open and dangerous. War, draft boards, riot police, assassinations, and movement meetings defined life. The language of many radicals reflected an expectation of rupture: revolution, the end of capitalism, the dawn of a new consciousness. Few imagined themselves as fifty-year-olds in cul-de-sacs arguing about property taxes.

Yet the ordinary pressures of adulthood asserted themselves. People fell in love, had children, and needed money. The same system they had denounced controlled access to jobs, housing, and health care. Some tried to build alternative economies and intentional communities, but most found those experiments fragile and exhausting. The mainstream institutions they once

distrusted offered something that utopian projects often struggled to provide: stability, regular pay, and the possibility of long-term security.

The shift did not happen in a single decision. It unfolded as a sequence of compromises that felt, at each step, reasonable. Taking a job in an established firm did not erase one's opposition to war. Buying a house did not mean embracing empire. Moving to the suburbs to raise children did not instantly nullify the memory of marching in the streets. People told themselves that they could hold on to their values while also seeking a decent life for their families.

Over time, though, mortgages, career ladders, and social networks built around workplaces and neighborhoods created new loyalties. The risk of losing that fragile security made open confrontation with power less appealing. A teacher with a pension, a manager with a promotion on the horizon, or a small business owner with loans to repay had more to lose than the restless youth they once were. Their radical selves were not exactly repudiated; they were placed in a mental archive and visited occasionally with a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

This was the slide into comfort and career: not a dramatic conversion to the ideology of empire, but a gradual reorientation of daily life in which the cost of serious resistance became, for most, too high to contemplate.

4.2 Co-optation by markets: when rebellion became a lifestyle brand

Markets watched all of this closely. The 1960s generated new music, fashion, and symbols that proved immensely attractive to younger consumers. It did not take long for corporate actors to realize that what had been spontaneous forms of expression could be packaged and sold. Jeans that once signaled working-class solidarity became premium products. Tie-dye, beads, long hair, and other markers of dissent were incorporated into advertising, making rebellion itself a style that could be purchased.

The process went beyond clothes and records. The rhetoric of authenticity, liberation, and self-expression migrated into marketing campaigns. One could "join the revolution" by buying soda, cars, or electronics. Commercials borrowed the visual language of protests and festivals, draining these images of their political content and using them to sell the products of the very system the movements had challenged.

For many former radicals, this co-optation was unsettling but also flattering. Their once-marginal tastes and habits were now mainstream. The music of their youth played in supermarkets. The slang of their subcultures appeared in magazines and television shows. The sense of being outsiders on the edge of something new gave way to a sense of having won a cultural victory: the old order had been forced to accept their style, if not their politics.

This blending of rebellion and commerce helped anesthetize potential outrage. If one can feel subversive while shopping, the itch for actual structural change may fade. People could keep listening to protest songs, smoking the same substances, and dressing in vaguely countercultural ways while working in institutions that maintained the status quo. The market delivered them a comforting illusion: that their cultural identity as former rebels was evidence that they still stood apart from the system, even as their daily economic roles strengthened it.

In that sense, the co-optation of rebellion into a lifestyle brand did not merely neutralize some symbols; it helped domesticate a whole generation's self-understanding. They were invited to see themselves as permanent freethinkers, even when their behavior no longer threatened anything fundamental.

4.3 Churches, spirituality, and the retreat from costly witness

Spirituality was another arena in which the 1960s experimented. Some walked away from the religious traditions of their parents and embraced Eastern philosophy, New Age practices, or esoteric paths. Others, including those connected to movements like the Holiness tradition, wrestled with how to integrate personal piety and social justice. There were genuine efforts to connect faith with opposition to war, racism, and poverty.

But as the years passed, many people's religious lives followed a similar trajectory to their political ones. Radical experiments faded; more conventional forms of churchgoing or individualized spirituality took their place. Congregations that had once hosted antiwar meetings or civil rights organizing drifted back toward safer forms of charity and inward-looking devotion. Holiness, in many settings, came to mean personal morality detached from structural critique.

The cost of prophetic witness is high. Churches that took strong stands against empire risked losing members, funding, and legal protections. Pastors who preached consistently about war and injustice burned out or were pressured into silence. Ordinary believers, already tired from work and family demands, often preferred messages of comfort to calls for sacrifice.

Meanwhile, new spiritual trends emphasized inner peace, self-care, and personal growth. These were not wrong in themselves; wounded people need healing. But when inward healing is detached from any outward demand for justice, it can become another way of making peace with an unjust world. Prayer, meditation, and worship can either fuel resistance or lull people into accepting whatever happens on the news as inevitable.

For a significant part of the 1960s generation, the spiritual path drifted toward the latter. Instead of sustaining a long-term moral struggle against empire, many religious communities and spiritual seekers ended up providing language and practices that helped individuals cope

with the anxiety of watching wars they no longer tried to stop. Faith became a cushion rather than a lever.

4.4 The long quiet: how rarely the 1960s veterans showed up for later wars

If the 1960s had truly created a durable culture of resistance, one would expect a recognizable pattern: whenever the state prepared for another major war, the same generation that had opposed Vietnam would visibly reassemble, bringing its experience and moral authority to bear. There were moments when this happened in part. Some Vietnam veterans spoke out against later interventions. Some aging activists marched against wars in Central America, the Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

But these were exceptions rather than the rule. The long quiet is striking. Many people who had once been willing to be beaten by police, arrested, or expelled now expressed their disapproval of new wars mostly in private conversations, if at all. They might shake their heads, sign an occasional petition, or share a critical article, but the sustained, embodied opposition characteristic of their youth was rare.

Several factors contributed to this absence. Physical aging matters: marching in one's twenties is different from marching in one's sixties or seventies. Health, caregiving responsibilities, and sheer fatigue impose limits. There is also the erosion of hope. After seeing how little their earlier efforts seemed to change the core machinery of empire, many may have concluded that nothing they could do now would matter. The line between realism and resignation is thin, and many crossed it quietly.

Moreover, the social density that had once made mass action possible had dissipated. Campus movements had scattered as people graduated. Communes and collectives dissolved. What remained were isolated individuals and small circles, not a cohesive infrastructure ready to mobilize at short notice. The media landscape changed as well, fragmenting attention and making it harder for dissent to coalesce around shared anchors.

The result is a generational paradox. The people best positioned to understand the cost and futility of certain kinds of war have been, as a cohort, largely absent from the front lines of resistance to later conflicts. They have stories, scars, and wisdom that could have strengthened younger movements, but much of that potential has remained unused. Their silence is neither total nor universal, but it is loud enough that the phrase "they went to sleep" feels, if brutal, not entirely unfair.

That long quiet is part of what makes current crises so bitter to contemplate. The bombs that fall now do so in a world where those who once shouted "Hell no" mostly watch, comment, or pray from a distance. The question for this generation, as time shortens, is whether any portion

of it can rouse itself again—not to relive its youth, but to use its remaining years to speak and act in ways that finally match the lessons it paid so dearly to learn.

5. Empire Without Interruption: The Post-Vietnam Reconfiguration

The fall of Saigon is often remembered as a humiliation, a moment when the American empire was forced to retreat. But defeat in a particular war is not the same thing as defeat of an imperial system. In the years after Vietnam, the United States did not dismantle the institutions that had produced the conflict. Instead, it studied the experience, learned what had gone wrong politically and militarily, and made adjustments to ensure that future wars would be more sustainable on the home front.

The result was not a humbled republic turning inward, but a reconfigured empire. The uniforms changed, the doctrines evolved, the rhetoric softened or hardened depending on the moment, but the machinery that links government, industry, finance, and global projection of force remained intact. If anything, it became more sophisticated and more deeply woven into the fabric of the national economy.

This section traces four aspects of that reconfiguration: the evolution of the military-industrial-congressional complex after Saigon, the development of new doctrines and enemies, the role of financialization in welding war to the economy, and the reasons episodic protest never reached the structural core.

5.1 The military-industrial-congressional complex after Saigon

When the last helicopters lifted off from the embassy roof, there were people who genuinely believed that something fundamental had been discredited. The scale of casualties, the televised brutality, and the open dissent from veterans and civilians alike seemed to prove that the country could not sustain large, open-ended wars of that kind again.

Inside the institutions that planned such wars, the lesson was read differently. The problem, from their perspective, lay not in the imperial project itself but in how it had been executed and sold. The architecture linking the Pentagon, major defense contractors, and Congress—the "military-industrial-congressional complex"—did not dissolve. It reorganized.

One key move was the end of the draft and the shift to an all-volunteer force. This change dramatically reduced the number of families with a direct stake in military decisions. With fewer middle-class sons at risk, it became easier for political elites to authorize deployments without triggering mass unrest. The composition of the armed forces shifted toward those with fewer economic options, and military service became one of the few guaranteed ladders out of poverty for many.

Another move was to spread defense contracts widely across congressional districts. Manufacturing and maintaining weapons systems meant jobs and revenue. Members of Congress now had strong local incentives to support high Pentagon budgets and new programs, regardless of their personal views on specific wars. The complex became embedded in the everyday economic life of communities far from Washington.

Research and development also expanded. Universities and laboratories deepened their ties to defense funding. The line between civilian and military technological innovation blurred. From satellites to computing, many of the technologies that define contemporary life were incubated within or alongside the structures of permanent war preparation. The ecosystem that emerged after Vietnam was thus not weaker but more diffuse and more resilient.

5.2 New doctrines, new enemies, same underlying machine

Alongside institutional adjustments came conceptual ones. Military and political elites worked hard to craft doctrines that would avoid another Vietnam-style quagmire, at least in appearance. They debated how to define “vital interests,” when to intervene, and how to keep public support. Out of these debates emerged various formulas: clear objectives, overwhelming force, limited duration, coalition building, and careful management of media coverage.

The enemies, too, shifted. Where Vietnam had been framed as a front in the struggle against international communism, later conflicts were justified in terms of regional stability, human rights, counter-terrorism, and the spread of democracy. After the Cold War, the lack of a single rival superpower did not end the need for threats; it multiplied them. Rogue states, failed states, terrorist networks, and vague dangers such as “weapons of mass destruction” filled the vacuum.

These new narratives gave the same machine a fresh sense of purpose. Each doctrine carried lessons from Vietnam: avoid visible body bags, control images, partner with local allies who can take the heaviest casualties, keep the American footprint flexible and often deniable. Special forces, proxy forces, and remote warfare expanded as tools of choice.

To the casual observer, this might have looked like a chastened power becoming more careful. Underneath, however, was continuity. The basic assumption—that the United States has both the right and the obligation to project force around the world to protect its interests—was never seriously abandoned. If anything, the removal of a peer competitor made unilateral action more tempting. The same factories produced weapons, the same agencies gathered intelligence, the same legislative committees approved budgets. Only the logos on the pamphlets and the adjectives in the speeches changed.

5.3 Financialization and the deepening bond between war and economy

While the military-industrial-congressional complex was refining its operations, another transformation was reshaping the broader economy: financialization. More and more of the nation's wealth and power flowed through financial markets, instruments, and institutions. War and preparation for war became deeply entangled with this process.

Defense contractors evolved from being primarily manufacturing firms to being components of financial portfolios. Their stock prices reflected not only current contracts but expectations of future conflict. Investors anywhere in the world could profit from rising defense spending without ever setting foot in a factory or a base. Pension funds, mutual funds, and index funds all ended up holding pieces of the war apparatus, often without beneficiaries realizing it.

Petrodollar arrangements and global trade systems also linked military dominance to financial stability. Protecting shipping lanes, oil fields, and friendly regimes was no longer framed solely as geopolitical strategy; it was tied to the health of markets and currencies. Warships and bombers became, in effect, guardians of an international order in which capital could move freely and profits could be repatriated.

Domestically, the dependence of certain regions on military contracts and bases meant that whole local economies rose and fell with Pentagon decisions. A cut in one weapons program could mean layoffs and political backlash in multiple states. This gave the war machine a kind of built-in political shield: opposing it meant risking not only abstract "security" but immediate economic pain for one's own constituents.

As financialization deepened, the line between "war policy" and "economic policy" blurred. The empire was not simply a matter of flags and bases; it became a structure in which many ordinary people's pensions, homes, and jobs were indirectly tied to continued military predominance. This does not mean most citizens consciously desired war, but it does mean that the system rewarded those who kept the machine running and punished those who seriously threatened to shut it down.

5.4 Why episodic protest could not touch the structural core

Against this backdrop, it is easier to see why bursts of protest, however intense, have so rarely altered the fundamentals. Marches, sit-ins, and symbolic actions can slow or complicate specific decisions. They can change narratives, galvanize individuals, and win partial victories. But they tend to be episodic, while the structures they confront are continuous.

The post-Vietnam reconfiguration of empire created a situation in which those structures are insulated from short-term swings in public opinion. Military planning operates over decades; weapons systems are designed, tested, and produced according to timelines that outlast

election cycles and protest cycles. The committees and boards that make these decisions are not directly accountable to people in the streets.

Moreover, episodic protest often focuses on the most visible aspects of war: particular invasions, bombings, or scandals. The budgets, contracts, doctrines, and financial instruments behind these events are complex and boring by design. They are not easily translated into slogans or songs. As a result, movements that gain momentum around a clear outrage can struggle to sustain interest and coherence once they encounter the labyrinth of bureaucracies and corporate structures where lasting change would have to occur.

There is also the problem of absorption. Individuals who demonstrate talent and energy in protest movements are sometimes recruited into the very institutions they once opposed: think tanks, media, governmental agencies, or NGOs that operate within the imperial framework. They may sincerely try to reform things from within, but their presence can also lend those institutions a veneer of responsiveness that diffuses pressure from outside.

Finally, protest cultures themselves are vulnerable to fatigue and factionalism. Without durable organizations capable of contesting for power in legislatures, bureaucracies, and markets, movements tend to flare and fade. They can influence the atmosphere in which decisions are made, but they rarely control the levers. In the decades after Vietnam, the empire learned to weather these storms: concede as little as necessary, wait for the crowds to thin, and then proceed.

For the generation that once believed their collective action could end war, this reality is hard to face. It suggests that while their protests mattered morally, they did not break the machine. The apparatus that emerged after Saigon was not a wounded empire in retreat but a hardened system better adapted to survive dissent.

6. The US–Israel Entanglement and the Gaza Catastrophe

When people speak bitterly of the “United States of Israel,” they are not claiming that two flags have literally merged. They are naming a fused project: decades of military aid, shared technologies, coordinated diplomacy, and a common security narrative that treats certain lives as expendable. The war in Gaza after October 2023 has made this entanglement painfully visible. It is not only that American-made weapons are used; it is that American political decisions help determine whether those weapons keep falling or not.

To understand why Gaza feels like a culmination rather than an aberration, we have to look briefly at how the US–Israel relationship was built, how Gaza functions as a twenty-first century laboratory for imperial methods, what has actually happened to its people and infrastructure,

and what kind of moral responsibility this creates for Americans who once believed their generation had learned the lessons of Vietnam.

6.1 A brief history of the US–Israel alliance and military aid

The United States recognized Israel within minutes of its declaration of independence in 1948, but the "special relationship" did not fully solidify overnight. Early aid was modest and sometimes cautious, as Washington balanced ties with Arab states against support for the new Jewish state. Over time, especially after the 1967 and 1973 Arab–Israeli wars, Israel came to be seen as a key strategic ally in the Cold War Middle East. Aid levels rose sharply, and military assistance increasingly took the form of sophisticated weapons systems, not just basic supplies.

By the end of the twentieth century, Israel had become the single largest cumulative recipient of US foreign assistance. Congressional and research estimates put total US bilateral aid and missile defense funding in the range of roughly $170 billion or more in current dollars, much of it in the form of grants earmarked specifically for military purchases. Long-term memoranda of understanding locked in ten-year aid packages, guaranteeing Israel a "qualitative military edge" over its regional adversaries. Missile defense systems such as Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow were co-developed and co-financed, embedding the defense industries of both countries even more tightly together.

After the Hamas-led attack of October 7, 2023, which killed around 1,200 people in Israel, the alliance shifted into emergency mode. The US rapidly surged munitions and air defense interceptors, deployed carrier strike groups to the region as a deterrent signal, and requested supplemental aid packages from Congress specifically tied to Israel's war in Gaza. By late 2025, independent analyses estimated at least around $20–22 billion in additional US military aid to Israel during the war period alone, on top of existing baseline assistance and multi-year arms deals.

This is the backdrop against which any talk of "United States of Israel" must be understood: a relationship in which American money, technology, and diplomatic backing are not peripheral but central to Israel's capacity to wage large-scale war.

6.2 Gaza as a case study in twenty-first century empire

Gaza was already a symbol of asymmetry before 2023. A densely populated strip of land under blockade by Israel (and, on its border, Egypt), it functioned as a contained, surveilled, periodically bombed enclave whose population had few real avenues of escape. Even before the full-scale war, international agencies described conditions in Gaza as approaching unlivable, with chronic shortages of clean water, electricity, and medical supplies.

After October 7, Gaza became a textbook case of how twenty-first century empire operates when it is no longer constrained by a rival superpower. Israel framed its campaign as a fight to eradicate Hamas; the United States framed its support as part of a global struggle against terrorism. In practice, this meant sustained aerial bombardment, artillery fire, and ground incursions into one of the most crowded places on earth, with the near-total destruction of basic infrastructure.

From an imperial perspective, Gaza illustrates several features of modern power. First, the use of a client or ally as the direct executor of violence, with the patron supplying weapons, intelligence, and diplomatic cover. Second, the management of global perception: official narratives emphasize precision and self-defense, while images of mass death circulate online and are contested as "Hamas numbers" or "fog of war." Third, the instrumentalization of international institutions. The United States used its veto power at the UN Security Council multiple times to block or water down calls for ceasefire or accountability, even as humanitarian bodies warned of catastrophe and possible famine.

In that sense, Gaza is not only a local tragedy; it is a global demonstration. It shows how far a heavily armed state, backed by a superpower, can go in devastating a civilian population without facing meaningful restraint from the international system. The "United States of Israel" is not a legal entity; it is an operational alignment that turns Gaza into shared moral territory, whether Americans acknowledge it or not.

6.3 Civilian death, infrastructural ruin, and demographic trauma

The numbers, even when disputed in detail, tell a clear story of disproportionate suffering. Over the nearly two years of war from October 2023 into late 2025, UN- and Gaza-based sources, as collated by independent researchers, indicate that more than 67,000 people in Gaza have been killed, with total Palestinian deaths in Gaza and the West Bank surpassing 68,000. Subsequent escalations and attacks pushed reported fatalities in the Gaza war above 70,000 by late 2025, with a very high proportion of those killed identified as civilians, including large numbers of women and children.

The physical destruction has been staggering. A World Bank interim damage assessment in early 2024 estimated tens of billions of dollars in damage to housing, health facilities, schools, roads, and utilities, with entire neighborhoods flattened. Later UN and humanitarian updates described a situation in which most of Gaza's population had been displaced, many living in tents or makeshift shelters, with water, sanitation, and electricity systems largely in ruins. By mid-2025, UN offices were warning of actual famine in parts of Gaza, not merely the risk of it.

These are not temporary disruptions. When large portions of a population are driven from their homes, when children grow up surrounded by death and deprivation, the trauma is durable and

transmissible. Schools destroyed are not only bricks lost; they are years of education erased. Hospitals bombed are not only buildings gone; they are long-term health outcomes worsened, for mothers, infants, the injured, and the chronically ill.

Demographic trauma also includes the message sent about whose lives count. When casualty figures are dismissed, when entire families are wiped out and recorded as numbers associated with an armed group, a lesson is taught: some populations exist in a zone where their suffering is negotiable, their survival conditional. That lesson does not stay contained within Gaza; it echoes globally, shaping how other societies understand their own vulnerability or expendability.

6.4 Moral responsibility: what "United States of Israel" really names

Calling the fused project a "United States of Israel" is not just a rhetorical insult; it is an attempt to name shared agency. It says, in effect, that the bombs, shells, and bullets do not only belong to one flag. When the United States flies weapons directly into Israeli bases, signs multi-billion-dollar arms packages during an ongoing campaign, and repeatedly uses its veto to shield that campaign from international censure, it is not a bystander. It is a co-author.

Moral responsibility, in this framing, has several layers. On the official level, it rests with those who authorize aid, sales, and diplomatic protection while being fully aware of the scale of civilian harm. On the institutional level, it extends to the complex of defense firms, lobby groups, think tanks, and media outlets that normalize or justify the ongoing violence. On the societal level, it touches citizens who, knowing enough to understand that something is terribly wrong, nonetheless accept narratives that place all blame elsewhere or retreat into the comfort of not wanting to know.

For the generation raised on Vietnam, this is a particularly sharp indictment. They cannot say they have never seen a war lie. They cannot claim ignorance of what sustained bombardment does to human beings. Yet as a cohort, they have mostly not treated Gaza as their own moral emergency. The phrase "United States of Israel" tries to strip away that distance. It insists that Gaza is not foreign in the sense of being someone else's problem. It is one of the places where American power is most nakedly at work, and therefore one of the places where American conscience, if it is awake at all, should be most engaged.

To accept that is to admit that the empire their youthful protests once challenged has not only survived but gone on to co-manage catastrophes of this scale. The point is not to drown individuals in guilt, but to break the spell of innocence. Only then is there any hope that the sleeping generation, and those who have followed them, might finally act in ways proportionate to the harm being done in their name.

7. Where Are Yesterday's Rebels? The Silence of the 1960s Generation

The images of the 1960s are still on posters and album covers, but the bodies have aged. The long-haired student in the photograph is now a grandparent. The young veteran throwing his medal onto the Capitol steps now limps when he walks. When new wars come, when Gaza burns, when drones hum over deserts, the question is unavoidable: where are yesterday's rebels now?

The answer is not that they vanished completely. Some have spoken, written, organized, and even been arrested again. But taken as a cohort, their presence has been faint compared to the noise and courage of their youth. The generation that once seemed poised to redefine the moral limits of American power has mostly met later wars with quiet disapproval, private lament, or distracted indifference.

To say this fairly, we need to trace the exceptions, understand the constraints of age, listen to their excuses and explanations, and then attempt a moral ledger that neither romanticizes nor demonizes them.

7.1 Tracing who did speak up: scattered prophets, not a cohort

To pretend that everyone from that era went silent would be false. There are names and faces that have continued to show up, decade after decade. Some veterans became lifelong peace activists, organizing against interventions in Central America, the Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond. Some former student radicals went on to teach, write, and mentor younger generations in the arts of dissent. Certain clergy, shaped by the moral fire of the 1960s, refused to let their pulpits drift into comfortable nationalism.

When the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began, older bodies did appear in protests. Gray hair showed up in marches, sometimes carrying signs that read things like "I was there in '68" or "Veteran against this war too." Letters to editors, sermons, blog posts, and small meetings in church basements or community centers bore witness to consciences that had not fully gone to sleep. In many towns, if you looked closely, you could find a handful of elders who still believed it was their duty to stand in the way, however symbolically.

Yet what emerges from this tracing is not a picture of a generation moving in concert, but of scattered prophets. The loud, public, cohort-wide identity as "the generation that said no" did not re-materialize. Instead of a broad wave of aging rebels, there were small clusters and individuals, often isolated, often ignored. Some were dismissed as relics, stuck in the past. Others were tolerated as local eccentrics whose protests no longer frightened anyone in power.

The contrast with the 1960s itself is stark. Then, the sheer numbers and density of youth mobilization forced political and media systems to respond. Later, the elders who retained their

fire were rarely numerous enough in one place to generate that kind of pressure. Their dissent mattered morally, but as a visible force, it was fragmented and easy to sideline.

7.2 Aging, fear, and the cost of re-entering conflict at seventy-plus

It is not trivial to ask a seventy-year-old to re-enter the kind of conflict they faced at twenty. Bodies that once could sleep on floors, outrun police lines, or endure jail are now managing arthritis, heart conditions, and the slow erosion of stamina. The practical obstacles to marching, getting arrested, or even attending long meetings are real.

There is also a different kind of vulnerability. Many older people carry responsibilities that did not exist in their youth. They may be caring for spouses, disabled relatives, or grandchildren. They may be dependent on fragile pensions or health insurance arrangements. The fear of jeopardizing the little security they have left is not cowardice; it is a recognition of real risk in a system with a thin safety net.

In addition, aging brings a more intimate proximity to death. For some, this sharpens moral urgency; they feel they have nothing to lose by speaking truth. For others, it encourages withdrawal. The energy required to confront police, courts, or hostile media may feel like energy they need to conserve simply to survive and maintain their relationships. When memories of past confrontations layer over the knowledge that time is short, the temptation to say “Let the young handle it now” can be strong.

Fear operates on subtler levels too. There is fear of being caricatured or misunderstood, of being told by younger activists that one’s frameworks are outdated, or of discovering that the causes that were once central are now entangled with ideologies one does not fully trust. To re-enter conflict at seventy-plus means accepting not only physical risk but the possibility of humiliation or irrelevance. Some are willing; many are not.

These realities do not excuse total silence, but they do explain why the kind of commitment that once seemed natural now feels to many older people like a mountain they cannot climb again.

7.3 Common excuses: “We did our part,” “It is too complex now”

Alongside these genuine constraints sit a set of familiar statements that function as shields. One of the most common is, “We did our part.” It often comes wrapped in stories of marches, sit-ins, arrests, and hard choices made decades ago. There is truth in those stories; many did pay a price in youth. But when this phrase is used to justify present inaction, it quietly redefines moral responsibility as something that can be fulfilled once and then expire.

Empire, however, does not retire. It keeps moving, changing targets and tactics. If opposition to unjust power is understood as a lifelong calling rather than a youthful phase, then the claim “We did our part” becomes less a statement of accomplishment and more a confession of

fatigue. It reveals a desire to have the moral benefits of having been rebelious once without the ongoing costs of staying awake.

Another common excuse is, “It is too complex now.” Wars today are indeed layered with complicated histories, regional dynamics, and toxic information environments. It can be genuinely difficult to know exactly which demands to make or which parties to support. For those who remember a time when issues seemed clearer—“Stop the draft,” “End this war”—the ambiguity of contemporary conflicts can be paralyzing.

But complexity can also be a convenient refuge. One does not need perfect knowledge of every faction and document to recognize certain simple facts: civilians being starved or bombed are victims; people living under occupation or siege are not free; the superpower supplying the weapons and diplomatic cover bears responsibility. Declaring “It is too complex now” often serves to justify standing at the edge of the burning building, discussing architectural theory instead of helping to pull people out.

Other variations of this posture include “The young do not want us,” “Everything is polarized,” or “Protest does not work anymore.” Each contains a grain of truth and a dose of self-protective distortion. Taken together, they form a narrative in which the generation absolves itself: the world became unmanageable, and so they quietly step back, framing withdrawal as realism rather than as a choice.

7.4 A generational moral ledger: what can fairly be charged—and what cannot

To write a moral ledger for any generation is dangerous. It risks erasing internal diversity and imposing a single verdict on millions of very different lives. It can easily become cruel, ignoring constraints, trauma, and the difficulty of remaining morally clear across decades. Any fair assessment must start by acknowledging that many individuals from the 1960s have lived sacrificial, principled lives, often in obscurity. Their faithfulness cannot be written off because others chose comfort.

At the same time, to refuse all judgment is also unjust. A generation that has, for decades, taken credit for having “changed everything” through its youthful movements cannot fairly object when someone asks whether it changed enough. On the positive side of the ledger, one can list cultural transformations, expansions of civil rights, and the ways in which blind obedience to authority was permanently weakened. Those gains are real and have benefited later generations.

On the negative side lie the failures to translate that spirit into durable structures that could resist empire. The absence of strong, independent institutions founded in that era and still functioning as brakes on war is striking. The ease with which many former rebels assimilated into corporate, governmental, or academic roles without bringing their earlier commitments

with them is part of that story. The tendency to celebrate the “good old days” without confronting what was left undone is another.

What cannot fairly be charged is omnipotence. No generation, however idealistic, could have single-handedly dismantled the American imperial system. Structural forces beyond any one cohort’s reach were always at work. Blaming those who were young in the 1960s for every subsequent war would be absurd. They inherited an empire; they did not create it from nothing.

What can fairly be charged is responsibility proportional to opportunity. They had an unusual opening: a moment when a critical mass of people, especially in the dominant society, questioned foundational assumptions. They had access to education, media attention, and a level of global sympathy that many movements in the Global South never enjoyed. They did some good with that opening, but they did not build enough that lasted.

The phrase “they went to sleep” is, then, a rough summary of this ledger. It does not deny the early courage; it points to the later drift. It does not demand that eighty-year-olds chain themselves to embassy gates; it asks why their collective wisdom and moral authority are not more visible in the struggles of this moment, when their empire, fused now with others, continues to kill on a scale they once vowed to oppose.

In the end, a generational ledger is less about condemnation than about invitation. If there is still time—and for some, there is—it invites those who remember the heat of those earlier marches to ask whether one more season of honest witness is possible. Not to prove that they were right all along, but to honor, at last, the implications of what they saw in the jungles of Vietnam and on the streets of their youth.

8. Why Protest Movements Fail Against Empire

From the inside, a protest movement can feel unstoppable. The streets are full, the chants are loud, the police are nervous, the air crackles with a sense of history. People cry, sing, hug strangers, and go home believing that something irreversible has begun. Yet decades later, the machinery they confronted is often still in place, redesigned perhaps, but not dismantled. The gulf between lived intensity and structural outcome is one of the great sources of bitterness in late life for many former activists.

To understand why empire so often survives, it is necessary to look beyond courage and numbers. Protest movements make predictable mistakes. They confuse emotional peaks with power, neglect the unglamorous work of building and contesting institutions, settle for symbolic gestures that feel radical but change little, and underestimate how adaptable their opponents

are. Gaza, as a culminating horror, exposes these failures harshly. It shows what a system can do when it has learned how to ride out outrage.

8.1 Mistaking emotional intensity for durable power

One of the most seductive illusions in politics is the belief that how something feels from within is a measure of its long-term impact. Standing in a crowd of hundreds of thousands—or even hundreds—can flood the nervous system with a sense of collective potency. Drums beat, voices roar, banners wave, and the experience itself becomes a kind of sacrament. For many participants, these are among the most meaningful days of their lives.

Empire, however, does not measure power by emotion. It measures power by control over resources, institutions, and routines. A march that ends after a few hours, no matter how intense, may be seen from above as a temporary disruption to be managed, not as a threat to the system's core. Public relations teams craft statements, police refine crowd-control tactics, politicians wait for the cameras to move on. The next morning, the bureaucracies that organize war and appropriation are back at their desks.

Movements that mistake intensity for durability often fail to plan for what happens after the rally. They do not build structures that can translate the temporary unity of the street into ongoing pressure in workplaces, courts, legislatures, and financial circuits. When participants return to the rest of their lives without new habits, new organizations, or new strategies for sustained leverage, the felt power of the moment dissipates.

This is not an argument against emotion. Without deep feeling, no one would risk arrest, reputation, or comfort at all. It is an argument against stopping at emotion. If outrage is not converted into long-term, disciplined activity, it becomes another consumable experience—exhilarating, exhausting, and ultimately forgettable to those who rule.

8.2 Neglecting institutions: law, finance, bureaucracy, and media

Empire is not built primarily in the streets, and it is not dismantled there. It is built in offices, boardrooms, classified briefing rooms, laboratories, and newsrooms. Laws are drafted, budgets allocated, contracts awarded, doctrines refined, narratives shaped. People with specialized knowledge and long time horizons manage flows of money, weapons, information, and legitimacy.

Protest movements often arise among those excluded from or disillusioned with these institutions. They develop a justified suspicion of formal politics and corporate media. The energy of the movement pours into direct action, alternative culture, and mutual aid. These are valuable, but when they become substitutes for engagement with the structure rather than complements to it, the imbalance is severe.

If there are not enough people willing to do the “boring” work—learning how budgets are made, how weapons are procured, how regulations are written, how media frames are created—then the system is left to those who are comfortable with it. Empire thrives in precisely those zones that seem lifeless to the imagination of the street. A four-hundred-page appropriations bill can accomplish more for war than a thousand fiery speeches against it if no one is there to contest its provisions line by line.

This neglect is partly a failure of the movements themselves, which have at times romanticized spontaneity and outsider status. It is also a failure of education and socialization, which rarely equip ordinary people with the tools to navigate and reshape complex institutions. Still, the result is that bursts of protest crash against structures that few participants fully understand, much less control. The machinery then absorbs the shock and continues to operate, perhaps with slight adjustments, but fundamentally intact.

8.3 The seduction of symbolic victories and performative radicalism

In the absence of access to structural levers, movements can become addicted to symbols. Certain acts—occupying a building, blocking a road, tearing down a statue, clashing with police—take on a heightened meaning. They signal purity, commitment, and defiance. Social media amplifies these gestures, rewarding images that convey risk and drama. Being seen to resist becomes a form of currency within activist subcultures.

Symbolic actions are not useless. They can shift discourse, open space for new ideas, and inspire others. But when they become ends in themselves, they risk sliding into performative radicalism—a politics more concerned with self-expression and group identity than with actual shifts in power. It is possible to “win” a symbol and lose everything else.

Examples abound: a corporation changes its logo for a month, a politician kneels in a dashiki, a city renames a street while its budget still feeds the same policing or military apparatus. Movements sometimes celebrate these gestures as proof of impact. Meanwhile, the underlying conditions that produced the injustice remain unchanged or even worsening.

Performative radicalism also fragments movements. Those who favor highly confrontational tactics sometimes define themselves as the only “real” opponents of the system, alienating potential allies who might be willing to engage in other forms of struggle. Internal debates become more about posture and purity than about building the broadest possible coalition around specific, winnable structural demands.

Empire benefits from this dynamic. As long as dissent is channeled into contests over symbols, the core flows of money, law, and violence can continue. A protester may feel morally superior for having occupied an office, while the next morning the same office quietly signs off on contracts or policies that perpetuate the very harms being opposed.

8.4 Lessons from Gaza about what real resistance would have required

Gaza is a brutal mirror held up to all these failures. The scale of the destruction, the length of the campaign, and the depth of the US–Israel entanglement expose just how little capacity exists, globally, to restrain an empire that has learned to live with outrage. Protests did occur. People marched in capitals around the world. Statements were issued, campuses erupted, and diplomats resigned. Yet the bombardment continued, pauses were brief, and the basic posture of the powers backing the war remained unchanged.

What would real resistance have required? Not magic, but more than what was available. It would have required institutions, not just events: networks of cities, unions, churches, universities, and professional associations willing to translate moral horror into sustained economic and political pressure. It would have required people with decades of experience in law, finance, and governance willing to burn their remaining social capital to block arms transfers, challenge trade relationships, and clog the machinery of diplomatic protection.

It would have required the generation that lived through Vietnam to treat Gaza as their second chance, not as a tragedy on a screen. Imagine if thousands of retired officials, veterans, clergy, academics, and professionals had coordinated to refuse cooperation with the war machine: refusing to advise, invest, vote, or work in ways that enabled it. Imagine if major institutions in multiple countries had been prepared, before the crisis, to suspend relationships or contracts automatically when certain thresholds of civilian harm were crossed.

Such scenarios are not utopian; they point to the kind of long-term preparation that has largely not been done. Movement cultures have often emphasized the next march, the next hashtag, the next moment, rather than the decades-long task of building levers that can actually move an empire when it is determined to act. Gaza reveals the cost of that neglect in bodies and rubble.

The lesson is not that resistance is futile, but that certain forms of resistance are insufficient. Emotional intensity without organization, symbols without structures, and sporadic dissent without institutional footholds cannot restrain a system that has woven war into its economic and political DNA. If future movements hope to do better, they will need to learn from this catastrophe: to think in terms of infrastructure, leverage, and continuity, not just catharsis.

For those who once believed that singing in the streets would be enough, this conclusion is painful. It means that the work they did was necessary but incomplete, and that the real test of whether empire can be slowed or redirected still lies ahead, in the hands of those willing to build what was not built last time.

9. Faith, Conscience, and the Refusal to Sleep Again

If empire has learned to survive protests, it has a harder time surviving conscience that refuses to be numbed. The question, especially for those shaped by Christian faith or other moral traditions, is whether they are willing to let their beliefs speak at full volume in old age. Holiness preaching once named certain acts as sin, certain habits as bondage, and certain structures as unrighteous. Pacifist streams within Christianity insisted that killing is incompatible with following Christ. Those convictions did not vanish; they were often simply narrowed down to private morality and personal habits.

To refuse sleep again means letting faith and conscience recover their full scope, including the political and imperial. It means admitting that war is not just a "policy issue" but a question of obedience or disobedience to what one professes. It also means finding common cause with secular frameworks that, in different language, reach similar conclusions about the wrongness of using overwhelming force against civilians for strategic ends.

In this light, Gaza is not only a geopolitical event but a diagnostic: it reveals what our doctrines actually mean when tested, how much our consciences can bear, and whether a generation that has already seen one disastrous war is willing to let another pass unchallenged.

9.1 Holiness, pacifism, and the gap between doctrine and practice

The Holiness tradition, in its better moments, has insisted that faith is not mere assent but a transformed life. Sin is not only individual acts but patterns and allegiances that contradict the character of Christ. At the same time, many Holiness churches have tended to focus their discipline on personal behaviors—alcohol, sexuality, entertainment, language—while treating questions of war and empire as peripheral or "political."

Pacifist strands of Christianity, whether in Anabaptist, Quaker, or other forms, have taken the Sermon on the Mount more literally. They have argued that loving enemies, turning the other cheek, and refusing to kill are not optional extras but central to discipleship. For them, participation in state violence, especially aggressive war, is a grave compromise.

The gap between these doctrines and practice became obvious in Vietnam and has become glaring again in Gaza. Congregations that proclaim holiness can watch the destruction of entire neighborhoods with little more than a passing prayer. Churches that sing about the cross can host flags and ceremonies that bless the machinery that drops the bombs. Some believers, of course, resist this drift; many others quietly adjust their theology to accommodate whatever their nation is doing.

Closing the gap would mean taking seriously that holiness includes how a community relates to war. It would mean recognizing complicity—through taxes, silence, or celebration—and treating it as a matter for repentance and change, not merely for private "concern."

9.2 Christian and secular frameworks for naming empire as sin

One does not need explicitly religious language to see empire as a moral problem. Secular ethics speaks of human rights, dignity, and the unjust concentration of power. Anti-colonial traditions analyze how one people's security is purchased at the expense of another's dispossession. Legal frameworks speak of war crimes and crimes against humanity. All of these, in different vocabularies, identify a common reality: the systematic devaluation of certain lives for the sake of strategic or economic advantage.

Christian language adds other dimensions. It speaks of idolatry when nations treat their own security or identity as ultimate. It speaks of principalities and powers—structures that have spiritual as well as material force. It calls the shedding of innocent blood an abomination. Empire, in this lens, is not just bad policy; it is a form of organized rebellion against the God who made all peoples in His image.

The point is not to demand that everyone adopt the same framework. It is to notice that multiple traditions converge on the judgment that deliberate, large-scale harm to civilians in the name of "security" or "deterrence" is wrong in a way that goes beyond miscalculation. When Christian and secular voices agree on this, they can reinforce each other.

For those who identify as followers of Christ, there is an added weight: they cannot honestly outsource their conscience to secular language alone. If they claim that Jesus is Lord, then what he said about violence, enemies, and the poor must be allowed to confront their nation's wars, not only their personal habits. Naming empire as sin is one way of bringing that confrontation out into the open.

9.3 Repentance for a generation: what it might look like in late life

Repentance is often imagined as a private experience early in life: a teenager at an altar, a young adult turning away from obvious vices. But biblical repentance is also corporate and lifelong. Whole peoples repent; elders repent; nations are called to turn from their ways. For a generation now in its seventies and eighties, repentance has a different texture. It is not about redoing youth; it is about telling the truth about what was done and left undone.

Practically, late-life repentance could look like several things. It might mean publicly acknowledging, in church or community, that "we went to sleep" politically while empire continued to kill. It might mean writing or recording testimonies that name not only the sins of government but the sins of silence and complicity in congregations and families. It might involve

redirecting whatever money, time, and relational influence remain toward those working to restrain war and repair damage.

Repentance might also include a willingness to be corrected by younger people and by those outside one's own national or religious group. Listening to Palestinians, veterans of recent wars, or refugees from other conflicts may be uncomfortable, especially when they describe harms that older listeners feel partly responsible for. Staying in that discomfort, rather than retreating into nostalgia or defensiveness, is a form of penitence.

Importantly, repentance is not only saying "we were wrong"; it is changing direction. For someone in late life, that change may be modest in worldly terms—signing statements, joining vigils, supporting relief efforts, breaking with war-justifying media—but significant in spiritual terms. It is a way of refusing to let the story end with sleep.

9.4 Listening to Gaza as judgment: the possibility of renewed witness

To say that Gaza is a judgment does not mean that its people are being punished by God; that kind of theology has been used too often to justify horror. Rather, Gaza can be understood as a judgment on those who watch and enable, a mirror held up to the nations and to the churches. It shows what our systems do when they are not restrained. It reveals whose lives we are willing to trade for "stability."

Listening to Gaza as judgment means letting the stories and images break through the filters that usually protect conscience. It means hearing the voices of doctors operating without anesthesia, parents burying children, displaced families starving, and recognizing that this is happening with weapons and diplomatic cover supplied by powers that claim moral leadership. For Christians in those powers, it means hearing Christ's own words—"Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me"—spoken through the rubble.

The possibility of renewed witness lies precisely here. An older generation, awake to this judgment, could decide that its last significant act on earth will be to stand publicly against such violence. Not because they expect to "win" in a conventional sense, but because they refuse to lie about what is happening. Pastors could preach differently. Retired officials could speak more freely. Grandparents could talk to their grandchildren about war with a clarity they never had in middle age.

This kind of witness would not erase past failures, but it would honor the truth and perhaps strengthen the consciences of those who come after. Gaza, like Vietnam, will mark the moral memory of the world for decades. The question for the 1960s generation is whether their names will show up, this time, not only in the footnotes of early protests, but in the late chapters—those where, finally, some of them refused sleep and chose to live out, in old age, the faith and conscience they once proclaimed in the streets.

10. Conclusion: After the Sleep, What Responsibilities Remain?

By the time a generation reaches its seventies and eighties, the temptation is strong to turn life into a highlight reel. The early marches, the songs, the wild courage of youth become a kind of personal mythology. For the 1960s cohort, that mythology has been unusually powerful: they were the ones who "stood up," who "changed everything," who "stopped a war."

This paper has asked a harder question. If empire remains intact, if the United States can help devastate Gaza with less domestic resistance than it faced over Vietnam, then what exactly changed? The answer is not "nothing"—culture, law, and personal freedoms did shift—but the deeper structure of war-making and imperial entitlement remained. The generation that once looked like a turning point became, in many ways, a brief spike in conscience followed by a long plateau of accommodation.

That does not mean the story is over. As long as people are alive, responsibilities remain. The question after sleep is not "What did we do back then?" but "What will we do now, with whatever time is left?"

10.1 The limits of nostalgia and the end of 1960s romanticism

Nostalgia is comforting because it edits. It keeps the music and the color while cropping out the failures, the blind spots, and the unfinished work. Romanticizing the 1960s has allowed many to avoid seeing how thoroughly the system they opposed recovered and adapted. The tie-dye, the posters, the anniversary documentaries all serve as a soft-focus lens.

The limit of this romanticism is Gaza. When images from that strip of land are placed alongside the old Vietnam footage, continuity is unavoidable. The helicopters are sleeker, the munitions more precise, the narrative more finely tuned, but the core pattern is the same: a heavily armed power, backed by the United States, inflicts enormous suffering on a largely defenseless population in the name of security.

To cling to the old romance in the face of this is to choose a comforting lie over a painful truth. Ending 1960s romanticism does not mean denying the courage and beauty that existed; it means refusing to let those memories stand in for a reckoning with what did not change.

10.2 From self-congratulation to self-examination

Self-congratulation says, "We were the good ones. We marched, we risked, we cared." Self-examination asks, "Given what we knew then, what did we fail to build? Given what we know now, what have we failed to do?" The first posture bathes old age in a warm glow. The second introduces a crack of sorrow and, with it, the possibility of honesty.

For the 1960s generation, self-examination means asking why the moral clarity of their youth did not produce more durable institutions of resistance. Why churches that preached holiness could accommodate imperial wars so easily. Why universities that once pulsed with dissent became pipelines into the very corporations and agencies that sustain empire. Why veterans who saw war's horror firsthand have been so rarely mobilized as a collective conscience.

This is not about personal guilt in the abstract. It is about tracing specific lines: from choices made to structures maintained, from silences kept to harms allowed. Self-examination does not erase what was done well; it simply refuses to let the story stop there.

10.3 The narrow window: what elders, vets, and former hippies can still do

Time is short, but it is not gone. An eighty-year-old cannot do what a twenty-year-old can, but they can do things a twenty-year-old cannot. They have stories, networks, and a certain freedom from career fear. There is still a window—narrow, but real—for elders, veterans, and former hippies to act in ways that matter.

They can speak plainly. A retired officer or pastor or professor who finally says, "The empire we served was wrong here, and it is wrong now," can cut through decades of euphemism. They can mentor and protect younger activists, offering cover, counsel, and caution without smothering their energy. They can withhold consent in concrete ways: refusing to invest in or work with institutions that directly feed the war machine, insisting that their churches, unions, or professional associations take public stands.

They can also leverage their symbolic capital. The same society that has turned "the Sixties" into a brand still listens, at least a little, when its icons break script. Open letters signed by elders, testimonies in congregations, interviews that refuse to sanitize, even late-life memoirs that tell the unvarnished truth—all can still shift how others perceive war and responsibility.

No single act will dismantle empire, but a pattern of such acts could puncture the illusion that the generation's work is finished. The window is narrow because bodies are failing and attention spans are short. That is precisely why whatever is done now must be done with urgency and clarity.

10.4 A final word to those who refused sleep—and to those who may yet wake up

Not everyone slept. Some never stopped resisting, often in small, unglamorous ways. They lived modestly, refused promotions that compromised their conscience, kept organizing when the crowds dwindled, and bore the loneliness of being out of step with their peers. To them, this paper owes respect, not rebuke. They are the quiet counterproof that it was possible to grow old without betraying what was seen in youth.

To the many more who drifted, the invitation is not to wallow in regret, but to recognize that even now, at the edge of life, there is room for one more turn toward truth. To let Gaza, and all that it represents, break through the anaesthetic of nostalgia. To say out loud, in whatever circles remain open, that war on this scale, under these conditions, is wrong—and that the fusion of American and Israeli power that enables it is a moral crisis, not a distant headline.

And to those who are younger, watching all of this unfold: do not mistake this diagnosis of a sleeping generation for an excuse to sleep yourselves. If anything, it is a warning about how easy it is to confuse moments of fire with a life of faithful resistance. The question will come to you as well, decades from now: when the empire of your time killed and displaced and starved, did you only feel deeply, or did you build and act?

After the sleep, responsibilities remain. They may be smaller in scale than the dreams of youth, but they are no less real. To accept them is to choose, even late, to live in truth rather than in a curated memory. That choice will not undo what has been done, but it can shape what is remembered about this generation—and perhaps clear a little space for the next one to see more clearly, and to sleep less.

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